

THE PYRAMIDS OF EGYPT: MONUMENTS TO VICTORIAN DESIRE

Judith Johnston

Introduction

In the years between Napoleon's failed invasion at the start of the nineteenth century and England's occupation of Egypt in 1882 (Said 88) there were various British incursions into Egypt under the seemingly innocuous flag of tourism and resulting in a series of publications as varied as Edward William Lane's influential *Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* (1836-37),¹ Lane's sister Sophia Poole's *The Englishwoman in Egypt* (1844), Thackeray's *Notes of a Journey from Cornhill to Grand Cairo* (1846), a title that interestingly brings London and Cairo into close proximity, and Anthony Trollope's short story, "An Unprotected Female at the Pyramids," published in *Cassell's Illustrated Family Paper* in 1860. In arguing that the Pyramids of Egypt are indeed Victorian monuments, I plan to explore in some detail Thackeray's 1845 articles for *Punch*, "Punch in the East," his chapter on Cairo, and Trollope's tale, as they are inflected by Victorian imperialism and complicated by Victorian gender ideology and sexuality.² As an epilogue, I will also consider the activities of travel writer and archaeologist Gertrude Bell at the end of the Victorian age, both in the light of these two mid-century accounts of gendered tourist activity at the Pyramids and in the monumental shadow cast by the Pyramids themselves as symbols of empire well into the twentieth century.

The Pyramids figure in this discussion above all as monuments to human endeavour: to the conquering of territories and the solid manifestation of the seemingly impossible. Re-evaluated in terms of women's lives too, these endeavours also become the dominant ones within Victorian gender politics as women began to try and overcome the more rigid ideologies which set them so firmly apart from men and realised to what extent that task must have seemed wellnigh impossible until quite late in the century. Egypt, as represented by the Pyramids, in western history and literature, ancient and modern, has figured significantly as a site of desire. The Pyramids themselves symbolise both the power that *was* Egypt, its glorious past, and by association, the power that the *idea* of Egypt bestows on the imperialist and coloniser and they become, in my discussion here, a trope for desire itself. Harriet Martineau's first view of the Pyramids in 1848 voices very precisely a sense of imperial desire. She could very well be talking about the British Empire itself:

¹ John Barrell argues that authors like Lane thought of themselves as "engaged to some degree [. . .] in the practice of science" (Barrell 100).

² The sexuality addressed in this article is heterosexuality, given the bias of the primary texts by Thackeray and Trollope on which I focus here.

I felt as if I had never before looked upon any thing so new as those clear and vivid masses, with their sharp blue shadows, standing firm and alone on their expanse of sand. In a few minutes, they appeared to grow wonderfully larger; and they looked lustrous and most imposing in the evening light. (Martineau 1: 25)

The accounts of Egypt in the documents of the ancient Roman Empire have always figured in English literature. The most obvious example is Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* which tellingly complicates the power nexus by including sexuality and erotic desire enhanced by orientalism. These are also the elements which lurk beneath the surface of nearly every traveller's account of Egypt whether in prose, or in poetry, like Richard Monkton Milnes's collection *Palm Leaves* (1844), a text which Thackeray had read and to which he refers in *Cornhill to Cairo*. Alexander Kinglake, writing for the *Quarterly Review*, is quietly cynical regarding Milnes's collection of poems, especially one poem, "The Harem." He expresses shock that a man of the world, a politician and a poet appears to support the Harem system (Kinglake 95). Milnes, it appears, offers such a "sweetly quiet picture" of harem life that Kinglake urges readers to reflect lest "that steady attachment to the cause of woman's freedom, which ought to be the creed of every true Englishman, may stand some risk of being disturbed or chilled" (Kinglake 100). Kinglake concludes that a harem is but a "paltry empire" (Kinglake 106), and praises Sophia Poole's *The Englishwoman in Egypt* for its more careful observations in comparison to the enthusiastic Milnes, commenting (albeit tongue in cheek):

At the very time that our bard was wandering on the banks of the Nile, as blind as Homer, the "Englishwoman in Egypt" was visiting many a harem, and carefully counting the wives. (Kinglake 108)³

This correlation of the harem system with the ideological position of the English woman is complicated by the nexus of sexual and imperial desire and is an issue I will return to in discussing Trollope's short story.

In the modern age, historically, Egypt is marked as a desirable imperialist target when Napoleon decides that reconquering Egypt will align him with Alexander the Great. Edward Said adds that the capture of Egypt by the French would include "the additional benefit of acquiring a new Islamic colony at England's expense" (Said 80). Napoleon felt he "knew" Egypt "tactically, strategically, historically, and [. . .] textually" (Said 80), and this brings me back to my first point, that Egypt had been constructed textually in the western canon as a site of desire. In the end Napoleon only managed textual appropriation, in the twenty-three volume *Description de*

³ Kinglake is the author of *Eöthen* (1844), based on his eastern travels, which Thackeray names an "excellent book" (Thackeray, *Cornhill to Cairo* 611). Said condemns it as "a pathetic catalogue of pompous ethnocentrism [. . .] solidifying [. . .] anti-Semitism, xenophobia, and general all-purpose race prejudice" (Said 193). These characteristics are notable too in Thackeray's writing. For a more extensive discussion of these issues see Lougy 230-31.

l'Égypte published between 1809 and 1828. Fourier's preface to that monumental text states unequivocally:

No considerable power was ever amassed by any nation, whether in the West or in Asia, that did not also turn that nation toward Egypt, which was regarded in some measure as its natural lot. (qtd in Said 84)

Said describes Napoleon's invasion in terms of theatre, suggesting that a "dramatic perspective" is constantly present in the *Description* and writing of the invasion as a *coup de théâtre* (Said 85). The painting by Jean-Leon Gerome, "Bonaparte before the Sphinx" (c. 1867-68) illustrates this concept brilliantly. The imaginative posing of the two figures in the form of confrontation also suggests a confrontation for Bonaparte with his ultimate destiny, that destiny so effectively captured in Shelley's sonnet "Ozymandias" (1818), "the decay of that colossal wreck." Despite such warnings, I want to argue that the Pyramids represent British imperialism's last grand monumental prize, its "natural lot" as Fourier puts it, and as such they become the subject of an intense Victorian imperialist gaze. In theatrical terms they eventually form the backdrop to any number of Victorian and later Edwardian dramas from explorer and spy Richard Burton to the performances of T. E. Lawrence but also to a number of Victorian comedies as well, comedy being the most appropriate term with which to describe the publications of Thackeray and Trollope under discussion here.

Near East Tourism, 1840-60: Thackeray and Trollope

British tourism in Egypt increased rapidly from 1840 on. This was partly due to agreements made between the British government and Egypt. P & O steamships, for instance, were permitted to land at Suez from 1841 and this made access to Egypt more "convenient and fashionable" (Barrell 101). Jonathan Culler notes that such ease of access in fact changes the whole nature of tourism from this time on (Culler 156). Certainly this is the age of tourist guidebooks published by John Murray among others, and of course the age of Thomas Cook who ran his first tour in 1841.⁴ Tourist itineraries in Egypt in this period were almost identical. John Barrell suggests that because the geography of Egypt forced most travellers to make the same tour, this made travel accounts more idiosyncratic "as an essential commercial response" to counter "the sameness of the itinerary" (Barrell 100). However, most of the Near East travel accounts from this period which I have read have a sameness nevertheless⁵ and

⁴ Cook's first foreign tour, to Paris, was in 1855. His first Middle East tour was an 105-day tour of Palestine and Egypt. The group left England on 24 January 1869. The firm eventually purchased its own fleet of Nile steamers. Cook's transport on the Nile was so efficient that the British Government asked them to organise the transport for the abortive attempt to rescue General Gordon from Khartoum (McWilliam 24 and 25).

⁵ This problem was commonly commented upon in reviews of books on North America for instance. From Basil Hall to Anthony Trollope, from Frances Trollope to Fanny Kemble to Harriet Martineau,

any idiosyncrasy, such as that of Thackeray, is far more closely related to his usual journalistic style than to the geography of Egypt.

More importantly, Barrell also argues that tourists from Britain especially were very conscious of the importance of Egypt and the overland route to the future of the Empire so that imperialist thoughts were very much in the minds of most tourists in the 1840s (Barrell 120). This is evident early in Thackeray's book *Cornhill to Cairo* when he writes in chapter two that the "next British lion is Malta, [. . .] ready to spring upon Egypt or pounce upon Syria, or roar so as to be heard at Marseilles in case of need" (Thackeray, *Cornhill to Cairo* 576). This boast of British readiness to secure Egypt recurs often in Thackeray's book and betrays a consciousness that remains until Gladstone's "reluctant take-over of Egypt in 1882" as Patrick Brantlinger puts it (Brantlinger 137). With the feasibility of the Suez Canal project becoming more apparent in the 1860s the importance of Egypt increased dramatically because the Canal offered the long-sought ease of access to those farthest reaches of Empire, India and Australasia.⁶ The opening of the canal in 1869 shortened the voyage to India from four months to three weeks (Wallach 6).

J. Russell Perkin argues that the literature on Egypt which tourists like Thackeray, and, I would suggest, Trollope, read, produced a site "where desires are granted, a place of magic and sexual freedom," and represented an "attempt to master the east empirically, through reports, surveys, histories, linguistic studies" all, Perkin suggests, "products of early imperialism" (Perkin 298). The romances especially (*Lalla Rookh* is one) offered the East as a "displaced location of English desires and fears" (Perkin 299). Tourists are so preconditioned by literature for seeing in very particular ways, that Thackeray can write at the end of *Cornhill to Cairo*, "Shelley's two sonnets are the best views I know of the Pyramids – better than reality" (Thackeray, *Cornhill to Cairo* 702). This literary preconditioning is exacerbated by what Boorstin argues is the tourist's innate passivity as opposed to the activity of the traveller (Boorstin qtd in Culler 156). I read a traveller in this context as someone who travels independently and probably has a very particular goal in view, such as exploring the social and cultural dimensions of another country and who is open to new experiences. But the difference between the two is slender. While tourists could be said to be directed and controlled both by rigid itineraries and rigid mind sets, passive receptors of a range of information, regardless of its accuracy, travellers can also be accused of similar limitations. And some tourists are open to the experiences that come their way. Thackeray is very conscious of the two categories and this is

the itinerary and reactions have a startling uniformity. One reviewer famously wrote of Dickens's *American Notes for General Circulation*: "any littérateur who had read Halliburton, Hamilton, Marryat, Trollope, Martineau – to say nothing of Stuart, Silk Buckingham, Tyrone Power, Robert Keely, and Fanny Kemble – might have written the whole of this portion of the work Mr. Dickens calls his own, [. . .] and we humbly consider the United States ought [. . .] to be regarded as peculiarly tabooed ground to novelists and authors", 'Dickens's American Notes,' *Fraser's Magazine* 26 (1842): 618.

⁶ See John William Shaw Wyllie, "A Visit to the Suez Canal," *Cornhill Magazine* 13 (1866): 363-84 who describes M. de Lesseps "triumphantly dragging a tiny boat from between the legs of John Bull, who vainly bestrides the new junction of the seas like a Colossus foiled and furious!" (368).

demonstrated most consistently by the way in which he ironises his experiences and plays with the already-existing concepts of traveller and tourist.

Thackeray's set of five articles for *Punch*, "Punch in the East. From our Fat Contributor," published early in 1845, are at first striking for their apparent banality and for their adherence to the idea of the pattern tourist. The "Fat Contributor," one of Thackeray's many writing personae, even quotes from his "Murray's Guide-book" (Thackeray, "Punch in the East" 45). What is more, he seems the very model of passivity. His concerns are with the food, the insects and the bedbugs which do not allow him to sleep, and his fellow-passengers. But the articles also reveal Thackeray ironising literary preconditioning: "I have travelled like Benjamin D'Israeli, Ulysses, Monckton Milnes, and the eminent sages of all time" (Thackeray, "Punch in the East" 31), and as the articles develop it is clear that their one and only thrust is the grand comic imperialist thrust of *Punch* itself.

The second article, "On the Prospects of *Punch* in the East," boasts of the boundless sway of *Punch* in the region and offers some insight into imperialist competition: "By it, we are enabled to counterbalance the influence of the French in Egypt" (Thackeray, "Punch in the East" 36). Moreover, it is the Pyramids, as a monument to *Punch*'s sway, that the "Fat Contributor," now turned active, sets out to conquer. The episode is written up in suitably mock-imperialist, mock-historicist discourse:

The 19th day of October, 1844 [. . .] is a day that ought hereafter to be considered eternally famous in the climes of East and West. I forget what was the day of GENERAL BONAPARTE'S battle of the Pyramids; [. . .] But I say THE 19TH DAY OF OCTOBER, 1844, is the most important era in the modern world's history. [. . .] The 19th of October was *Punch's Coronation*; I officiated at the august ceremony. To be brief – as illiterate readers may not understand a syllable of the above piece of ornamental eloquence – on the 19TH OF OCTOBER, 1844, I PASTED THE GREAT PLACARD OF PUNCH ON THE PYRAMID OF CHEOPS. I did it. The Fat Contributor did it. [. . .] If I perish, I have not lived in vain. (Thackeray, "Punch in the East" 61)

As the illustration accompanying part V, "Punch at the Pyramids – (Concluded)" shows (fig. 1), the "Fat Contributor" was in fact hauled up the Pyramid physically: "two Arabs dragged me forward by the arms – the volunteers pushed me up from behind" (Thackeray, "Punch in the East" 75). In the last of his dispatches, Thackeray suggests that this moment, this conquering of the Pyramids, should be offered to the "Committee of the Fine Arts as a proper subject for the Houses of Parliament – *Punch* pointing to the Pyramids, and introducing civilization to Egypt" (Thackeray, "Punch in the East" 74).

Thackeray's other published account of the same travels, *Notes of a Journey from Cornhill to Grand Cairo, by way of Lisbon, Athens, Constantinople, and Jerusalem: Performed in the Steamers of the Peninsular and Oriental Company (1846)* has for the most part, naturally enough, a different tone from the predominantly comic

one of the *Punch* articles and the narrator this time is probably Thackeray's best-known writing persona, Michael Angelo Titmarsh. The imperialism is a more serious matter in this work, and while it is expressed comically, it has none of the sheer farce of the *Punch* articles. The anxiety about sexuality is much more obvious too. As Robert E. Lougy suggests, "Thackeray momentarily envisions a dangerously eroticized world uninhibited by restraint. The harem [. . .] is thus a metaphor for desire" (Lougy 241).

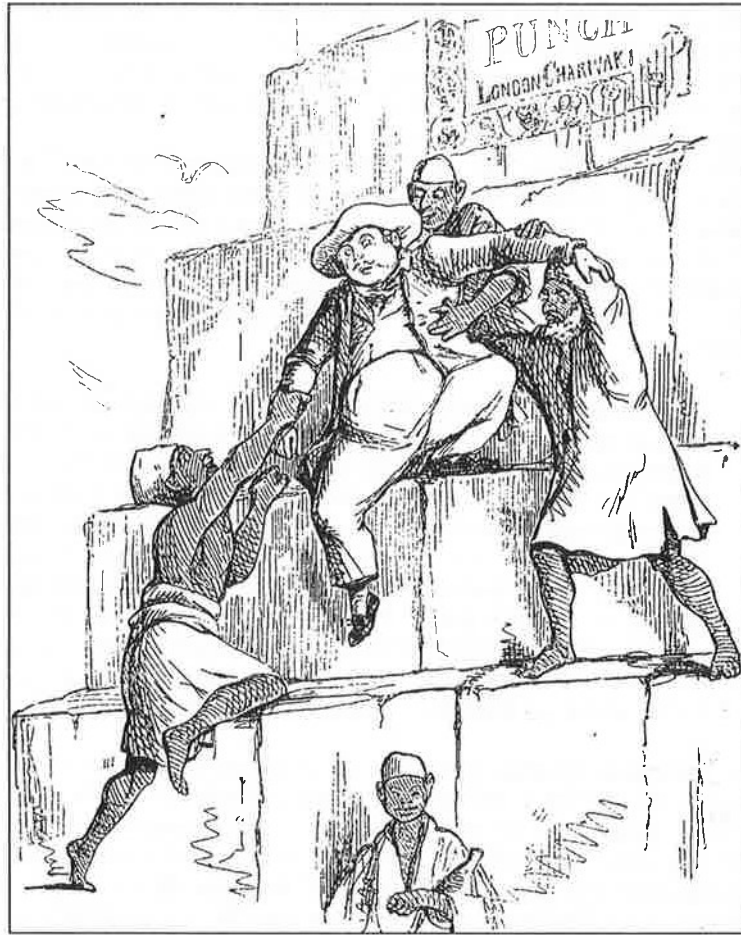


Fig. 1. W.M. Thackeray, "V – Punch at the Pyramids," *Punch* 8 (1845): 75.

Thackeray is in a state of anticipation throughout the early stages of his travels. He recurs often to the image of the harem, or as he defines it, "that place of love, obedience, and seclusion" (Thackeray, *Cornhill to Cairo* 618) and prepares himself (it

is his word) for arrival in Egypt. These are the two predominant themes of his chapter on Cairo. The following passage indicates both this anticipation and his awareness of the irony of allowing literary preconditioning with the reference to Tennyson:

I had been preparing myself overnight, [. . .] for sensations on landing in Egypt. I was ready to yield myself up with solemnity to the mystic grandeur of the scene of initiation. [. . .] Placid Sphinxes brooding o'er the Nile – mighty Memnonian countenances calm – had revealed Egypt to me in a sonnet of Tennyson's, and I was ready to gaze on it with pyramidal wonder and hieroglyphic awe. (Thackeray, *Cornhill to Cairo* 677)

Thackeray's semantics are of particular interest here. He is ready to *yield* himself up and Egypt will be *revealed* rather than discovered, and he is prepared to *gaze* on the spectacle. I would suggest too that these are precisely the terms that might be used of his recurring references to the harem. His portrayal of himself is as passive audience, prepared to be entertained and yet ironising the anticipated spectacle with his overwriting: "solemnity," "grandeur," "initiation," "brooding," the alliterative "mighty Memnonian countenances calm" with its Latinate inversion, culminating in the final two phrases which border on the sarcastic.

Nevertheless I would argue that Thackeray desires that "pyramidal wonder" and tries to provide it with the self-conscious grandeur of a dawn setting that is full of glorious colour, only to be dashed to pieces at the end by ironic reduction and finally dismissal:

in the east was a long streak of greenish light, which [. . .] grew to be of an opal colour, then orange; then, behold, the round red disc of the sun rose flaming up above the horizon. [. . .] The distances, which had been grey, were now clothed in purple; [. . .] in an hour or two, we saw the Pyramids. Fancy my sensations, [. . .] two big ones and a little one: [. . .] Several of us tried to be impressed. (Thackeray, *Cornhill to Cairo* 683)

Thackeray is assuming here the cloak of the unimpressed, blasé tourist, a phenomenon he had described earlier, and perhaps proudly, as particularly English.

It is at this point, in the last chapter of *Cornhill to Cairo*, that Thackeray brings England and Egypt together. Addressing himself to a supposed reader, he agrees that so far he has not offered "a good description of Cairo," regretting that he has "peered into no harems." Rather what he has described "is England in Egypt. I like to see her there with her pluck, enterprise, manliness, bitter ale and Harvey sauce. Wherever they come they stay and prosper." (Thackeray, *Cornhill to Cairo* 686). I would suggest that the humour here cloaks a serious pride in British imperialism, particularly signalled by the abrupt switch from the singular pronoun "her" to the plural, "they," and that this inverted tone is continued when Thackeray then compares Napoleon to a less famous individual, Thomas Waghorn, who established the feasibility of transit

across the desert between Cairo and Suez, connecting to steamers coming down the Red Sea.⁷ In Thackeray's boast the Pyramids do indeed become conquered monuments to Victorian enterprise and entrepreneurship:

Nap massacred the Marmelukes at the Pyramids: Wag has conquered the Pyramids themselves; dragged the unwieldy structures a month nearer England than they were, and brought the country along with them. All the trophies and captives that ever were brought to Roman triumph were not so enormous and wonderful as this. All the heads that Napoleon ever caused to be struck off [. . .] would not elevate him a monument as big. (Thackeray, *Cornhill to Cairo* 686-87)

Having said this, however, once again Thackeray undercuts the moment, this time with apostrophe, unable to resist the comic possibilities of his English hero's name and perhaps recalling Napoleon's dismissal of England as a nation of shopkeepers: "O my country! O Waghorn! [. . .] When I go to the Pyramids I will sacrifice in your name, and pour out libations of bitter ale and Harvey sauce in your honour" (Thackeray, *Cornhill to Cairo* 687).

Thackeray's other preoccupation is with the women. He is easily convinced of the reputed "horrible sensuality practised" and is both fascinated and repelled.⁸ He tries to manage his fascination by controlling the women through the picturesque so that while women's dress displays the figure "to its full advantage" at the same time there is "a fortune to be made for painters in Cairo" (Thackeray, *Cornhill to Cairo* 695). He sees black women in the slave market who he describes as "black cattle." The dealer forces one of them to undress before him "which she did with a great deal of shuddering modesty." But Thackeray determinedly manages the moment with a variety of strategies: the women are animalised: "cattle," "flock" and the word "wool" is used of their hair; they are dirty; and then, most surprisingly of all, he reassures himself and his readers by comparing their condition to that of women in England, claiming: "They are not unhappy; they look to be bought, as many a spinster looks to an establishment in England" (Thackeray, *Cornhill to Cairo* 696). This remark uncannily predicts the underlying basis of Trollope's short story.

Thackeray's most telling encounter, however, is with a woman in the house of his friend "J." From the evidence I have located it seems to me that "J" is most probably the artist John Frederick Lewis who lived in Cairo from 1840 to 1850 and for this reason was "probably more familiar with the life of women under Islam" than most European men in this period (Benjamin 15). Lewis used his own home as the "set" for his most famous painting "The Hhareem" (and others) and Thackeray describes "J" as "established here in the most complete Oriental fashion" in a "long,

⁷ Thomas Waghorn (1800-50), according to the *Dictionary of National Biography*, was a lieutenant in the navy and promoter of the overland route to India.

⁸ See also Patrick Brantlinger, *Rule of Darkness*, who suggests Victorians generally "found the Orient's alleged sensuality both abhorrent and endlessly fascinating" (136).

queer, many-windowed, many-galleried house” (Thackeray, *Cornhill to Cairo* 697 and 698). As Thackeray approaches the house he writes:

There were wooden lattices to those arched windows, through the diamonds of one of which I saw two of the most beautiful, enormous, ogling black eyes in the world, looking down on the interesting stranger. [. . .] why the deuce was Zuleika there, with the beautiful black eyes!⁹ (Thackeray, *Cornhill to Cairo* 698-99)

The word “ogling” gives him away. Thackeray is an outsider here. As Lougy points out he does this by nominating himself an “interesting stranger” (Lougy 231). I would suggest that he is in fact rather an “interested stranger” as he cross-questions his friend as to what keeps him in Cairo – and finally comes to the point: could it be the black eyes? Imagine his disappointment to discover the eyes are those of the black cook “who has done the pilaff and stuffed the cucumbers.” But in Thackeray’s illustration (fig. 2) of those eyes looking down from an ornate window on the “interesting stranger,” which reproduces an identical window to those in Lewis’s paintings, the reversal of the positioning of the gaze, a moment of promise, of a forbidden sexuality, remains in a country where woman’s “merit is in knowing how to vary the beast’s pleasures” (Thackeray, *Cornhill to Cairo* 689), a statement that comes closest to an open expression of prurient sexuality.

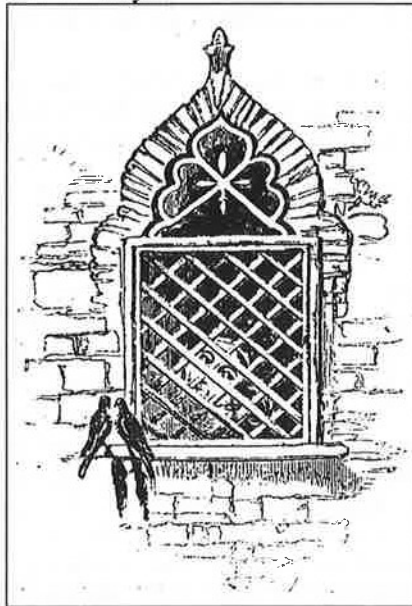


Fig. 2. W.M. Thackeray, “Zuleika,” *From Cornhill to Cairo, Works*, VII (1872), 698.

⁹ The reference is to the heroine of Byron’s poem, *The Bride of Abydos: a Turkish Tale*.

Dane Kennedy writes that Richard Burton's translation, *The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night* (1885), is sometimes regarded as constructing "an orientalist interpretation of desire, identifying the Orient in terms of an unrestrained feminine sexuality" (Kennedy 331). I want to suggest, however, that Thackeray's encounter with Zuleika's eyes and his accompanying comments reveal this Orientalist attitude is a commonplace well before the publication of Burton's translation. Kennedy goes on to argue that in fact Burton claims that "Islamic women possess freedoms all but unknown to Western women" (Kennedy 331) and Thackeray's encounter tends to confirm this. Thackeray complicates the generally accepted positioning of the male gaze when he self-consciously encounters Zuleika's eyes on him, rather than his gaze, lasciviously on her. Reina Lewis argues, in another context, that when the voyeuristic viewing position is ruptured this destabilizes "the West's fantasized relationship to the Orient as other" (Lewis 162). We can locate in Thackeray's writing both an "unrestrained feminine sexuality" and the destabilization of his "fantasized relationship to the Orient" when he designates himself an "interesting stranger."

I want to turn now to look at Anthony Trollope's short story, "An Unprotected Female at the Pyramids" which was first published in *Cassell's Illustrated Family Paper* on October 6 and 13, 1860. Trollope was sent to Egypt in 1858 by the Post Office to negotiate a postal agreement with the Egyptian government and appears to have carried with him the usual complex baggage of ideologies and prejudices. For instance, in his novel *The Bertrams* (1859), which he started while in Egypt, he writes:

a man who goes to Cairo *must* see the Pyramids [. . .] but I must enter a loud, a screeching protest against the Arab brutes [. . .] who have these monuments in their hands (qtd in Mullen 322).

The desire to wrest the monuments from the "wrong" hands and place them safely in British hands is palpable in this statement. Like many British government officials, neither did Trollope believe that the canal being promoted by the French was possible and he was keen instead to support overland transport, which had particular implications for the Post Office of course. Throughout the story there is a strong sense, just as there is in Thackeray's writing, of a complex political relationship with the French exacerbated by imperial competition and a sense of inherent British superiority. Cairo and its Pyramids prove an essential locus to this competitive spirit.

The characters depicted in the short story are a second generation of tourists. Asa Briggs complains that these stories of Trollope's "pandered to the public" and that they offer types rather than characters (Briggs 26). Briggs adds that the writing is "neither better nor worse than the many travel articles in *Punch*" (Briggs 27). The reference to *Punch* is perceptive. Trollope makes reference to a range of the same kind of stereotypes as employed by Thackeray. However, there is nevertheless a consciousness of change in Trollope's story, and a shifting of ideological perspectives that is nuanced by the cultural exploration of tourism. For instance, Perkin notes that the *Arabian Nights* "was a particularly significant work" in establishing a set of conventions about the "mysterious and exotic east" as a site where desires are granted,

where there is magic and sexual freedom but also “cruelty, treachery, and terrible violence” (Perkin 298). For Thackeray this is still very much so. He writes of his experiences in Syria: “If it be but to read the ‘Arabian Nights’ again on getting home, it is good to have made this little voyage and seen these strange places and faces” (Thackeray, *Cornhill to Cairo* 650). Trollope, on the other hand, begins his story with the remarks of an omniscient narrator referring to “the happy days when we were young” who notes that most people’s impressions of Grand Cairo were “probably taken from the ‘Arabian Nights’ [. . .] of [a] life full of quaint mysteries.” But, Cairo is no longer mysterious because it is on the route to India and Australia and “its streets and costumes are no longer strange to us” (Trollope 57) and Cairo reveals an “oriental life [. . .] dreadfully diluted by Western customs” (Trollope 58). Trollope is declaring that the *Arabian Nights* and their conventions are passé.

Notably, both writers are very conscious of their readers, for instance in *North America* (1862) Trollope writes that the “English author should feel that he writes for the widest circle of readers ever yet obtained by the literature of any country” (qtd in Briggs 46). But while Thackeray’s predominant style is to use the direct form of address, “you,” the above quotations show Trollope attempting something more complex, a kind of inclusivity with his use of “we” and “us.” Selden notes of this style of Trollope’s that he creates a narratee who is like the narrator (Selden 117), that is, a narratee, as distinguished from a reader, who is able to recognise and agree with the narrator’s statements and assumptions. Back in 1981 James Kincaid argued, quoting Frank O’Connor’s 1957 discussion, that Trollope’s narrator likes to lead his reader “up the garden path of his own conventions and prejudices and then to point out that the reader is wrong” (O’Connor qtd in Kincaid 199). In this way, says Kincaid, Trollope seeks to educate the reader (Kincaid 200). I find it significant that Trollope carefully establishes this same style in the opening sentence of “An Unprotected Female,” and the effect is very much as Kincaid puts it, “that we – the author and the reader – are undeluded, tolerant, realistic, and not bamboozled” (Kincaid 200). In this story however, unlike *Barchester Towers*, the subject of Kincaid’s discussion, it is more difficult to locate any “rhetorical insistence” on “moderation and acceptance” (Kincaid 201). The overall effect, or so it seems to me, is that the narrator succeeds in making the contemporary reader at least complicit with the racist and sexist statements that abound throughout the narrative.

There are two ideological preoccupations. The first might be summed up quite simply as West versus East, or “Orientalism” in the form in which Said discusses so compellingly in his book of the same name. Moreover, this is highlighted by the almost casual dismissal of the Pyramids by Trollope’s tourists who are only there out of a sense of cultural duty, their eagerness to see these wonders rapidly dissipating the closer they get. As Trollope’s narrator notes:

But all these feelings became strangely dim, their acute edges wonderfully worn, as the subjects which inspired them are brought near to us. “Ah! so those are the Pyramids, are they?” says the traveller, [. . .] “Dear me; they don’t look so very high, do they? For heaven’s sake put the blind down, or we shall be destroyed by the

sand." And then the ecstasy and keen delight of the Pyramids has vanished, and forever. (Trollope 67)

John Barrell suggests that in some British writers orientalism emerges in their accounts as "genocidal fantasy" (Barrell 119). Trollope comes close to this in "An Unprotected Female" when the American Jefferson Ingram attacks the Arab guides who have escorted them up the Pyramid: "he raised his stick, and struck first one and then another as violently as he could [. . .] [a]ny ordinary civilised men would have been stunned by such blows," although this statement is then promptly undercut when the narrator adds "but the objects of the American's wrath merely skulked away" (Trollope 78). Thackeray has similar comments to make of these men, who he designates "ruffians" and "brutes," who have to be kicked "vigorously and unmercifully" (Thackeray, *From Cornhill to Cairo* 704-05).

The second ideological preoccupation is also easily identified as "the woman question." Mr. Ingram wonders at the "ingenuity with which Miss Dawkins had travelled from Cheops and his Pyramid to the rights of women in America" (Trollope 71) and similarly the reader of this tale might wonder at Trollope's ingenuity in making the same journey. The ingenuity resides in Trollope thinking of the vast imperial enterprises of the past which the Pyramids represent, intersected as they are by desire, the longing for identity, for power and for sexual fulfilment, and for transformation of an existing condition, and then giving this thought to Miss Dawkins to apply to her own invidious social and political position:

Cheops, to me, is more than Napoleon Bonaparte. [. . .] I am a woman, [. . .] And to us it is not given – not given as yet – to share in the great deeds of the present. The envy of your sex has driven us from the paths which lead to honour. But the deeds of the past are as much ours as yours. (Trollope 71)

It is striking I think that Trollope chooses to examine the gender politics of the woman question, complicated by sexual desire, in this deceptively ordinary tale which has, after all, acute edges of its own. As I stated at the outset, the Pyramids are a site of desire and what the tale recognises is their particular force in this regard. Trollope's tale reveals a very different, yet oddly related, preoccupation to that of Thackeray whose focus is on the sensuality and sexuality of the East. Sexual desire is rampant in the developing relationship between Fanny Damer¹⁰ and Jefferson Ingram, a relationship which the tale validates. Miss Dawkins, the "unprotected female" desires to be an independent woman, but the narrator implies she is really, like Fanny Damer, in quest of a husband. The narrator's desire is to see Miss Dawkins fail.

When the story proper begins, Trollope's narrator notes that ladies are now to be seen in the streets of Cairo, "women who are without veils," that is, Western women, mostly in family parties (Trollope 58). But then there is Miss Dawkins who:

¹⁰ The name Damer may well reflect Trollope's preparatory reading for the trip. The Hon. Mrs. Dawson Damer published *Diary of a Tour in Greece, Turkey, Egypt, and the Holy Land* in 1842.

was, in the first place, an unprotected female of about thirty years of age. As this is becoming an established profession, setting itself up as it were in opposition to the old-world idea that women, like green peas, cannot come to perfection without supporting sticks, it will be understood at once what were Miss Dawkins' sentiments. (Trollope 59)¹¹

Trollope's semantic choices are interesting here. The word *female* is implicitly opposed to the possible alternatives, "lady" and "woman." The woman's age is used to suggest she is dangerously close to being an old maid, and the word "profession" has various sordid implications, including both the oldest profession and the suggestion that Miss Dawkins is a confidence trickster, battenning onto family parties which will then defray her expenses. The "green pea" analogy suggesting the fragility and helplessness of women, coupled to the implied courtliness of the phrase "old-world idea," reveals the narrator's position pretty clearly. Miss Dawkins makes the case for herself: "She considered – or at any rate so expressed herself – that peas could grow very well without sticks" (Trollope 59-60). In other words, she does not need support, she can make her way around the world without it, and while she will do this with due moderation "she had no idea of being prevented from seeing anything she wished to see because she had neither father, nor husband, nor brothers available for the purpose of escort" (Trollope 60). In a somewhat similar case, Thackeray, in *Cornhill to Cairo*, notes merely in passing that the party formed to visit the Pyramids from his hotel included "a lady [. . .] bent like the rest upon going to the summit of Cheops" and makes no further remark about her (Thackeray, *From Cornhill to Cairo* 703). Thackeray's use of the term "lady" highlights the implications of Trollope's choice of "female" in his tale.

However, the "green pea" analogy becomes more interesting when the two other women in the story are considered, Mrs. Damer and her daughter Fanny. Setting out for the Pyramids, "Damer *mère* was leaning on her husband, as was her wont. She was not an unprotected female, and had no desire to make any attempts in that line. Damer *fille* was attended sedulously by Mr. Ingram" (Trollope 62). They are attractive, pretty, ornamental, and useless as Trollope's dismissive French terms suggest. Left alone at the base of the Pyramid while the others climb to the top, Mrs. Damer is surrounded by Arabs demanding backsheish and is likened to "a piece of sugar covered with flies" (Trollope 80). The protectors of these two women decide against Miss Dawkins, as ruthlessly as Jefferson Ingram had thrashed his Arab guides, dismissing her as an opportunist, someone who "plays her game well" like an "old

¹¹ George Eliot's Gwendolen Harleth in *Daniel Deronda* complains: 'We women can't go in search of adventures – to find out the North-West Passage or the source of the Nile, or to hunt tigers in the East. We must stay where we grow, or where the gardeners like to transplant us. We are brought up like the flowers, to look as pretty as we can, and be dull without complaining. That is my notion about the plants: they are often bored, and that is the reason why some of them have got poisonous.' (Eliot bk. 2 ch. 13: 171).

soldier” (Trollope 82). The “steady attachment to the cause of woman’s freedom” recommended by Kinglake (100) is lost in this tale. Finally, the narrator himself insults her by his choice of colloquial language at the end of the story: “Poor Miss Dawkins was left in Cairo for some time on her beam ends,” and while Fanny and Jefferson Ingram later marry in England, “when I last heard of Miss Dawkins, she was still an unprotected female” (Trollope 85).

Epilogue: Gertrude Bell and the Post-Victorian Period

Trollope’s Miss Dawkins is only eventually redeemed with the exploits of Gertrude Bell. There is a famous photograph of Gertrude Bell taken at the Cairo Conference of 1921 (fig. 3). The delegates, astride camels, are arrayed in front of the Pyramids and the Sphinx, which serve as monumental symbols of the prize which is the Near East. Gertrude Bell, with Churchill on her right and T. E. Lawrence on her left, and a string of other British male dignitaries might be deemed an *overprotected* female at the Pyramids, given that the might of the British Empire itself flanks her on either side.¹²



Fig. 3. Gertrude Bell flanked by Winston Churchill (left) and T.E. Lawrence (right) at the Pyramids during the Cairo Conference in 1921. (University of Newcastle).

¹² The Cairo Conference was held in March 1921 and ran for 2 weeks. Among the decisions was British agreement to support King Faisal’s claim to the throne of Iraq. Bell wrote of the conference, “It has been wonderful. We covered more work in a fortnight than has ever before been got through in a year. Mr. Churchill was admirable” (qtd in Burgoyne 2: 211).

After Bell's death, T. E. Lawrence wrote to her father that her political work, "one of the biggest things a woman has ever had to do – was as finished as mine. That Irak state is a fine monument: even if it only lasts a few more years" (qtd in Burgoyne 2: 9). H. St. John Philby, uses the word "monument" of her achievements too, and in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* records of Bell's role at the Cairo Conference:

Even as Stanley Maude was the conqueror of Mesopotamia, so was she the maker of Iraq. [. . .] it will stand forth in history a monument to her genius, [. . .] and to the practical idealism tempered with honest opportunism which were the outstanding characteristics of a remarkable Englishwoman (qtd in Arberry 8)

The behaviour of the single woman so carefully critiqued in Trollope's short story, which might well have been summed up as "opportunism" ("she had a strong inclination to use the arms and legs of other people when she could make them serviceable") (Trollope 60) we now discover used of another single woman but carefully (if somewhat ambiguously) modified as "honest." Bell, writes Arberry, was "the close associate and loved colleague of men whose names will live in the history of the Near East" (Arberry 7) although she too had her problems with those same men as did "poor Miss Dawkins."

In 1906 Gertrude Bell visited Egypt with her father. In contrast to the tourist accounts of mid century, her enthusiasm stands out: "I do love it all, and the people, and everything – above all, the weather!" (Burgoyne 1: 236). She was not the only woman to feel this way about the country and her belief in the validity of Britain's presence there is always implicit in everything she writes, although not quite the kind of jingoistic belief expressed by Frances Power Cobbe in a response Cobbe wrote to William Clarke's 1899 article "Is Britain on the Down Grade?". Cobbe expressed real enthusiasm for the Empire:

The evils of extended empire do not frighten me as they do Mr. Clarke. They are great indeed, but they have their compensations. I knew Egypt before it was taken under the wing of England, and I think that the good we have done in that ancient land and the relief we have brought to the miserable downtrodden fallahen may well be placed to the balance of our national account, against many faults elsewhere. [. . .] we should rather send forth our soldiers and our civil servants with that grand old programme, to "bear the white man's burden" through the world, than shudder because a necessity seems laid on our race to roll onward over all shores like a mighty tide. (Cobbe 226)¹³

¹³ Cobbe's was the only response solicited from a woman. (Clarke's article was sent to a range of public figures). Other published responses were from: 1. Conan Doyle; 2. H. G. Wells; 3. F. W. Farrar, Dean of Canterbury; 4. Alfred Russel Wallace; 5. Albert Spicer, MP; 6. Leonard H. Courtney, MP; 7.

Bell, like Cobbe, would have felt confident about “knowing” the Near East intimately.

Bell’s account of a visit to the Pyramids is disappointingly brief: “Hugo and I went to the Pyramids and enjoyed ourselves very much,” but like Thackeray she is much more forthcoming about the scenery itself:

the air and light in this country are more beautiful than anything I have ever seen. It’s so incredibly clear – all the shadows are deep purple, and the bare hills take on the most wonderful colours. At sunset the yellow-orange deserts, and the blue flood water, and the green of the young corn look like brilliant enamel. And one sees half the universe at a glance, it is so clear. (Burgoyne 1: 236)

“Seeing the universe” is a grand phrase for the imperialist gaze, and demonstrates to a nicety to what extent the Near East, as a site of desire, is captured above all by the published words of those who came to visit either as tourists or later as archaeologists, civil servants, and espionage agents. This brings me back to Thackeray who imagines, at the end of *Cornhill to Cairo*, being rebuked for having so little to tell, after all, about the Pyramids themselves:

Not a big phrase – not a rapture? Do you mean to say that you had no feeling of respect and awe? Try, man, and build up a monument of words as lofty as they are. (Thackeray, *Cornhill to Cairo* 705)¹⁴

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Frances Power Cobbe; 8. R. F. Horton; 9. Arnold Thomas, chairman of the Congregational Union; 10. W. H. Massingham, Editor, *Daily Chronicle*; 11. James Bryce, MP; 12. Goldwin Smith.

¹⁴ See Horace, *Odes*, bk. 3, XXX: “more durable than bronze, higher than Pharaoh’s / Pyramids is the monument I have made.”

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